



Veggies rule OK



Vegetarians still make up a relatively small proportion of the population, but semi-vegetarianism is catching on fast. **ANGIE KELLY** reports.

EATING plant foods plus fish is a new millennium version of vegetarianism growing more popular by the day. As each new research paper singing the protective praises of a diet high in fruit, vegetables and grains is released, Australians are choosing to eat more meat-free meals.

Recent new guidelines for anti-cancer eating released by a national nutrition authority are built on the foundation that if Australians ate more plant foods, up to 30,000 cases of cancer could be prevented each year.

Ask any dietitian and they'll tell you that the scientific evidence proving the protective health benefits of plant foods is overwhelming.

"The growth area is not strictly speaking among vegetarians but the group who call themselves semi-vegetarians," said Sydney consultant dietitian Sue Radd.

"These are people who some days of the week have meals free of meat, chicken or fish.

"That means they would be eating more plant foods than people who focus on meat for every meal. A diet high in fruit, vegetables and

other plant foods is now being acclaimed by all kinds of people - politicians, movie stars, scientific researchers and musicians as well as the average person.

"There is overwhelming scientific evidence that eating such a diet is conducive to a longer life and to better health. The protection comes from plant foods - there are no studies to show if you eat more red meat that it improves your longevity or cuts your risk of disease. All the studies suggest the opposite.

"But that doesn't mean you can't include some meat, the important issue is that everyone can benefit from boosting their intake of plant foods."

At the launch of the Australian Nutrition Advisory Council's anti-cancer dietary guidelines last month, Ms Radd said there was much evidence to prove vegetarians lived longer and suffered less disease than meat-eaters.

In a further study, in which 800 Australians were surveyed about what they ate every day, 30 per cent of people said they were either strict vegetarians, partial vegetarians or people who ate little or no meat. Of that percentage, the vast majority

(23pc) belonged to the group which ate little or no red meat though they did not describe themselves as vegetarians.

Interestingly, 18pc of the total number surveyed told the Dangar Research company last year that they actually preferred to eat vegetarian food most of the time, though they didn't perceive themselves as vegetarians either.

"We are all doing it, we're all eating less meat and more veggies," said Tempo nutritionist Catherine Saxelby. "Australians eat far less meat now than they did 15 or 20 years ago, especially teenagers and those in their early twenties."

Ms Radd, who is a vegetarian, said while the number of strict vegetarians who avoided all animal produce remained small, the trend towards semi-vegetarianism was growing.

Ms Radd said one reason for the trend was the growing awareness of

research proving that people who eat the most fruit and vegetables have the lowest incidence of cancer and other diseases, even smokers.

Nutritionist Rosemary Stanton describes her own diet as made up mainly of plant foods plus fish. In her book *Healthy Vegetarian Eating* (Allen & Unwin, \$6.95), Ms Stanton said people who chose not to have meat on their plate needed to be careful to include enough other foods to provide essential nutrients, especially iron.

"If you are going to choose it then you need to take a little bit more care.

"Teenage girls especially need to be careful because they need lots of iron. You can get enough iron without eating meat but you need to know what you are doing. You need to include legumes regularly and a range of grains, seeds, nuts and green leafy vegetables of all kinds," Ms Stanton said.

Eating for iron

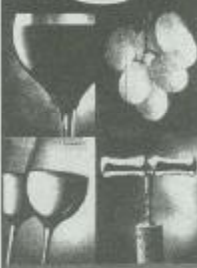
Iron-rich foods to eat if you choose to eat little or no red meat:

- Iron-fortified breakfast cereal plus low fat milk
- Wholemeal bread
- Brown rice
- Wholemeal pasta
- Legumes such as



- lentils, chickpeas and soya beans
- Nuts and dried fruit
- Fish (contains one third the iron content of red meat)
- Chicken (contains half the iron content of red meat)
- Green leafy vegetables such as spinach, silverbeet and bok choy
- Orange juice
- Capsicum, tomato, strawberry, berries (for vitamin C which aids iron absorption).

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